

From the Valley to a Pit Legitimation of the State and Counter-Narratives through Turkish TV Series

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Introduction

“In my life, apart from my family elders and the old acquaintances I respect, I did not kiss and I don’t kiss nobody’s hand”.

That was one of the comments in 2004 of the Turkish underworld’s iconic figure Alaattin Çakıcı. Çakıcı was expressing his discomfort that he was identified by millions of viewers to a character in one of the most famous mafia TV series in Turkey who, moreover, had kissed the hand of one of his rivals². “Kurtlar Vadisi” - *The Valley of the Wolves* (in English), was one of the most popular TV series on Turkish television, run 97 episodes between 2003 and 2006 and then four films, in the history of Turkey.

The *Valley of the Wolves* was not the first mafia genre TV series or films in Turkey. It was, however, the first one to make the shadowy relations of the state with the organized crime one of the main themes of its plot. This new sub-genre of series, where the state and its survival intertwine with the organized crime are integral and central parts of the story. Such subgenre had started with the *Valley of the Wolves*. It resurfaced with the TV series “Eşkîya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz” - *Bandits* where, once again, the state and the organized crime are closely linked.

Domestic and international political realities are interwoven in the plots of this sub-genre of TV fiction. These are interpreted in accordance with the dominant narrative of each period. Nonetheless, their common ground is the sanctity of the state and the nation, as well as the legitimation of shadowy connections with the organized crime in order for the “holy state” to survive.

However, at the same time when these series sanctify the state, its survival and its ubiquitous legitimacy, which today seem to be in a come-back, another sub-genre has emerged after 2016. In this case, organized crime plots have nor of the glamour neither of the “holiness” of the state as presented in the *Valley of the Wolves* and the *Bandits*.

Furthermore, “Adana Sifir Bir” and “Çukur” are two very popular raw TV series that reveal a counter-narrative to the one of the sanctity of the state and the nation, where organized crime substitutes the state as a desperate means of daily survival, economic re-distribution and social justice. Considering that popular culture is a very insightful mirror of social and cultural dynamics and struggles (Kulturkampf), these two opposite TV sub-genres in Turkey reveal that within the Turkish society today there is a strong current of “bottom-up”

² Hurriyet Kelebek magazine, “Çakır gibi el öpmem”; <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/cakir-gibi-el-opmem-214153>; published 1 April 2004. Date Accessed: 11 May 2020; In the same statement, Çakıcı also expressed his discomfort for the negative influence of the series on the youth.

contestation of and resistance to the “holiness” and unlimited legitimation of the state. At the same time, the intensity of the current social and political fragmentation is entwined with hard economic and social realities that can legitimize mafia-style violence as the ultimate way of survival, reaching a sort of “tribalization”.

Valley of the Wolves and Reframing of the Susurluk scandal

The main character of the *Valley of the Wolves*, Polat Alemdar, is an intelligence agent who infiltrates the Turkish mafia in order to destroy it. However, he ends up becoming a leading mafia figure himself. He then develops friendships with other mafia godfathers and gang leaders who are, however, portrayed as patriots. One of his mafia friends is the character of Süleyman Çakır. Eventually, Polat Alemdar breaks away from his state agency and continues his fight against the mafia and the enemies of the nation alone.

Just before he leads the Turkish mafia to its downfall, he discovers that the network was in fact ruled by a shadowy Judeo-Christian organization. He then gives up and surrenders himself to the police. During the subsequent trial, Polat Alemdar and his friends defend their actions by claiming their loyalty to the nation and the homeland. The court finds them not guilty and discharges them, celebrating their deeds for the Turkish nation.³

In the TV show, Süleyman Çakır dies, with the Turkish press speculating on demands from real underworld figures of his death. Although his allegedly fictional character dies, Çakıcı himself has survived his turbulent life. After serving 16 years, he was released from prison on April 16th, 2020, benefiting from a controversial amnesty law to tackle coronavirus in Turkish prisons. Çakıcı was serving sentences for a number of crimes, including organizing the murder of his ex-wife⁴ in 1995.

While Çakıcı was associated with Süleyman Çakır for many of the *Valley of the Wolves*' viewers, Polat Alemdar was also associated with another famous figure of the Turkish underworld: Abdullah Catli. Abdullah Catli was a wanted Mafia hitman and convicted heroin smuggler, who was carrying six different sets of

³ Berfin Emre Çetin, *The Paramilitary Hero on Turkish Television: A Case Study on Valley of the Wolves*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, London, 2015

⁴ Alaattin Cakici's ex wife was mafia leader Dünder Kılıç's daughter Nuriye Uğur Kılıç. His lifetime jail sentence given over her murder was decreased to 19 years and two months because it was considered as a provocation that Kılıç has said publicly that PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was more honorable than Çakıcı.

identity documents issued by the Turkish authorities and with alleged close connections with Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT).⁵

Contrary to Alemdar, who survives the 97 episodes of shootings, bombings and tortures and goes on heroically in the films of the *Valley of the Wolves*, Catli died in a car accident in Sururluk, Western Anatolia, on November 3, 1996. Three of the four passengers in the car were killed instantly, with the fourth one left seriously injured. The three dead were Abdullah Catli, Huseyin Kocadag, a prominent police chief who had served in sensitive security positions, and Catli's mistress, Gonca Us, a former beauty queen. The injured passenger was Sedat Bucak, a member of parliament for the then ruling True Path Party (DYP) and the leader of a Kurdish tribe that was one of the main contributors to the pro-state militia of "Village Guards". This militia was used by the government in its war against the PKK. Found in the trunk of the Mercedes was a small arsenal of weapons, including several handguns fitted with silencers.⁶

The accident was quickly baptized as the "Susurluk scandal". The Interior Minister, Mehmet Agar, closely connected to Good Party's (IYI) Meral Aksener⁷, had to resign, and the public was faced for the first time to "a vast matrix of security and intelligence officials, ultranationalist members of the Turkish underworld and renegade former members of the PKK".⁸ Jenkins explains that "during the course of the parliamentary inquiry, officials from Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) admitted that they had started recruiting ultranationalist members of the Turkish underworld in the early 1980s".

These ultranationalist members of the Turkish underworld had first been used to assassinate members of the militant Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA). Later on, and particularly from the late 1980s onward, they were used to target and assassinate suspected PKK members or sympathizers, in return for immunity from prosecution for their other activities—such as trafficking heroin through Turkey into Western Europe.⁹ Allegedly, Alaattin Çakıcı and Abdulah Catli, together with being gang leaders and smugglers of the Turkish underworld with direct links to the far right and its Grey Wolves (Ülkü Ocakları/Idealist Hearths), they were also involved in the Turkish state service as clandestine operatives.¹⁰

⁵ Jenkins, Gareth, Terrorism Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, "Susurluk and the Legacy of Turkey's Dirty War", 28 December 2008; <https://jamestown.org/program/susurluk-and-the-legacy-of-turkeys-dirty-war/>, Date Accessed: 13, May 2020

⁶ Jenkins, Gareth, Terrorism Monitor, Jamestown Foundation, *idem*

⁷ Daily Sabah, "Meral Akşener: An iron lady or an unrepentant nationalist?", 28 April 2018; <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2018/04/28/meral-aksener-an-iron-lady-or-an-unrepentant-nationalist>; Date Accessed: 13 May 2020

⁸ Jenkins, *idem*

⁹ Jenkins, *idem*

¹⁰ Gingeras, Ryan, "Heroin, organized crime and the making of modern Turkey", Oxford University Press, 2018

The Susurluk scandal was one of the long-term factors of the ultimate collapse of the secularist political elites of the 90s and the emergence of Tayyip Erdogan's AKP in 2002. Six years after the Susurluk scandal, through the adventures outlined in the *Valley of the Wolves*, the interactions between the Turkish underworld and the Turkish state entered in almost every Turkish house through TV. These soon became an integral part of the public life and public debate in Turkey. As Çelebi argues, the narrative of the *Valley of the Wolves* is "not a simple story of love and adventure in the underground, but a specific interpretation of relationships and events that is symbolized by the "Susurluk Incident"¹¹ and "gives a nationalist interpretation of the events related to "Susurluk."¹²

"Holy state" in times of change

The series started in 2003, during a major transition period of Turkey and the Turkish state, following the electoral victory of AKP in 2002. It was a period when Turkey was coming closer than ever to the EU and where a strong wind of liberalization and recalibration of the civil-military relations was in full speed. Paradoxically, at the same time, Turkey and the Turkish national psyche and pride were trying to recover from the new tensions with the US after the American invasion in Iraq.

Against this political background, the creation of the *Valley of the Wolves* and its subsequent popularity could be perceived as a metaphor of the pre-AKP state's efforts to resist the upcoming changes. It also allowed the party to keep its place in the collective psyche of the population through a fictional sublimation of the ultimate necessity of the survival of the state as the only essential expression of the nation.

Indeed, fiction was intimately linked to political realities, capturing the full interest of the public, and creating a sort of pathos between the script of the series and the realities in Turkey. One of the most striking examples of this close intertwining between fiction and reality was the participation of the late Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Dentkas in the series as himself, the so-called "President of the Republic of Northern Cyprus" (only recognized by Turkey as such).

Çelebi argues that:

"In the time that this episode was shown, the affair of Cyprus was on the top of the agenda of Turkish political elite and the media. The mainstream

¹¹ Çelebi, Mehmet, Celil, "Valley of Wolves" as a Nationalist Text, Thesis to the graduate school of Social Sciences of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 2006.

<https://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12607446/index.pdf> Date Accessed, 15 May 2020

¹² *idem*

nationalist stance towards the problem which proposed to conserve the status quo was being challenged in many ways at the time”.¹³

Therefore, while in reality the pre-AKP state and its status quo were giving what seemed to be their last battles to resist the changes ignited by the newly elected AKP, the *Valley of the Wolves*’ discourse was a hymn to the state and its absolute legitimacy, allowing to employ tactics to survive by any means. This is known as a *sublime state*, which includes many corrupt elements, Celebi says, and these corrupt elements were pictured to be manipulated by foreign interests. The duty of the state is, then, getting rid of these elements.

Nonetheless, this task and responsibility are only possible through illegal means, and the legal state deemed incapable of realizing such task. This is where Polat comes in, as he was supposed to make sure of the “survival of the state’s” supremacy over legality”.¹⁴

According to Çelebi:

“by offering an acquittal and even a sublimation of the state’s illegal activities, namely the ‘deep state’, the series invites us to understand the state as the primary source of all legitimacy”.¹⁵

The Valley of the Wolves is, therefore, closely linked to the ubiquity and the ultimate “holiness” of the Turkish state and is justifying the legitimacy –and not the legality- of all actions done from the state to protect itself and the nation.

“Deep state”

The idea of a “deep state” (*derin devlet*) is transpiercing the Valley of the Wolves at a period where in real politics the Turkish public was witnessing a long first circle of what was largely perceived as an “unmasking” of the “deep state”, which started with the Susurluk scandal (1996) and ended with the Ergenekon case (2008-2016). “Ergenekon”¹⁶ was an allegedly “secretive, ultra-secular, ultra-nationalist organization [that] had been carrying out terrorist attacks and manipulating events behind the scenes, all in an alleged plot to throw Turkey into chaos and justify a military coup ousting then-prime minister, and current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.”¹⁷

¹³ *idem*

¹⁴ *idem*

¹⁵ *idem*

¹⁶ Ergenekon is a place in Turkic mythology, in the Altai Mountains in central Asia. According to the myth, Ergenekon was a valley where ancient Turks took refuge after a military defeat, before being led to freedom and greater glory four centuries later by the grey wolf Asena-which is the political nickname of Meral Aksener.

¹⁷ MacDonald, Alex, Middle East Eye, Ergenekon: The bizarre case that shaped modern Turkey, 30 August 2019; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/ergenekon-trials-turkey-gulen>; Date Accessed: 15 May 2020

Ergenekon may have never existed and the investigation and its ultimate motives were seriously put in doubt¹⁸, whilst “AKP supporters viewed it as the “cleaning of the century,” urging prosecutors to leave no stone unturned. On the other hand, the government’s detractors feared a politically motivated witch hunt of opponents of the AKP and, more broadly, the Islamic conservative camp”,¹⁹ which was, at that time, dominated by the presence of the Gulen movement in the judiciary and the security apparatus.

Nevertheless, the case and its publicity had “clearly uncovered information on wrongdoing on the part of some of the accused, and certainly on the prevalence of democratically questionable views among a section of the Turkish elite”²⁰. Thus, giving new propulsion to the widespread feeling of a “deep state” in Turkey.

Soyler shows that the “deep state” is not a new phenomenon. The term itself, in this case, was coined by then-Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in 1974, while he was addressing the operations of “counter-guerilla”. Since then several political leaders, including Süleyman Demirel, Bülent Ecevit, and (President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan have all admitted the existence of the deep state.²¹

According to Soyler:

“Deep state is associated with authoritarian, criminal, and corrupt segments of the state that function in a democratic regime by exploiting and reproducing its deficiencies. At the same time, the deep state derives legitimacy from that political regime in exerting a coup threat, instigating military interventions, and committing organized crime and extrajudicial killings within the boundaries of the formal security apparatus. Perpetrators are held responsible for massive human rights violations ranging from massacres and assassinations to extrajudicial executions and disappearances.”²²

Gingeras has written extensively on the “deep state” in Turkey, tracing a genealogy of this phenomenon since the late Ottoman Empire until

¹⁸ Jenkins, Gareth, Silk Road Studies, Between Fact And Fantasy: Turkey’s Ergenekon Investigation, August 2009;

https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2009_08_SRP_Jenkins_Turkey-Ergenekon.pdf; Date Accessed: 15 May 2020

¹⁹ *idem*

²⁰ *idem*

²¹ Söyler, Mehtap, The Turkish Deep State, State Consolidation, Civil-Military relations and Democracy, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, London, 2015

²² *idem*

contemporary Turkey.²³ As a result, this revealed its shadow over the historical, political, cultural and psychological processes and dynamics in modern Turkey.

Paradoxically enough, throughout the modern Turkey, the notion of a “deep state” is both feared and despised as a danger against democracy, yet simultaneously admired and sublimated as the ultimate bastion of the survival of the state and the nation against internal traitors and external enemies. In that sense, the *Valley of the Wolves*, “overtly advocates ‘deep state’, that is the breakdown between legality and legitimacy as far as ‘the survival of the state’ is concerned. It has sympathy for traditional mafia, but it essentially backs up illegal activities on behalf of state. Thereby, it articulates a nationalist mentality and carries some important features of the Turkish nationalism”.²⁴

Eşkiya, kabadayı and the state

The notion of the ultimate legitimacy of the survival of the state through relations with underworld figures is portrayed in yet another very popular TV series, the ongoing *The Bandits (Eşkiya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz, Bandits cannot become rulers of the world)*, first broadcasted in 2015 on the pro-government ATV channel. The script is the story and the bloody adventures of Hızır Çakırbeyli who grew up within the underworld and who wants to take revenge for the killing of his brother. Çakırbeyli moves fast up the underworld’s hierarchy and at a certain point he is proposed by the state take the place of the leader of the mafia, Ünal Kaplan. Kaplan is selling arms to Turkey’s enemies while Çakırbeyli is considered to be loyal to his country. The series revolves around the many dilemmas of Çakırbeyli between different loyalties, one of them being to choose between the state and the mafia, family, romantic love and attacks from Kaplan.

Nationalism is relatively less accentuated than in the *Valley of the Wolves*, though it is still transpiring the series, mainly portraying (like its predecessor) Turkey being threatened by foreign powers and their lackeys in within the country, while once again, the connection between the underworld and the state is one of the central points of the plot. The series started in 2015 and transforms within its surrounding political, social, and psychological environment, as they were shaped after the Gezi protests in 2013 and the failed coup attempt in 2016.

²³ Gingeras, Ryan, “Heroin, organized crime and the making of modern Turkey”, Oxford University Press, London, 2018

-In the Hunt for the “Sultans of Smack:” Dope, Gangsters and the Construction of the Turkish Deep State, *The Middle East Journal*, Volume 65, No. 3, Summer 2011

-Beyond Istanbul’s ‘Laz Underworld’: Ottoman Paramilitarism and the Rise of Turkish Organised Crime, 1908-1950, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Aftershocks: Violence in Dissolving Empires after the First World War (August 2010), pp. 215-230

²⁴ Çelebi, Mehmet, Celil, *idem*

These events led to the emergence of a new authoritarian Turkish state as the main political dynamic.

Comparing to the period of the beginning of the *Valley of the Wolves*, where the traditional authoritarian state was fighting for its survival against the liberal winds blown by the AKP of 2002, the period before Gezi, and especially after 2016 until today, is witnessing the enhancement of Tayyip Erdogan's power and subsequently the ongoing consolidation of the Presidential system and its intrinsic authoritarian effects on state and politics. Simultaneously, with this re-emergence of a new form of authoritative state as the sole legitimation of the nation, the nationalism inspired by neo-Ottomanism has given new power to the siege psychology and the collective fear that Turkey's historical destiny (or vindication) to become a global power is undermined by foreign powers outside and traitors inside.

In *The Bandits*, the (deep) state is darker and more opaque comparing with the *Valley of the Wolves*. The main hero, Hizir Çakırbeyli, is not originally connected with the state as Polat Alemdar was, but he is nevertheless obliged to deal with the presence of the state and its efforts to coopt him. Hizir Çakırbeyli is a contemporary hybrid underworld figure who seems to personify the tragedy of the leaders of the Ottoman and Turkish underworlds. At the same time, he embodies the patriot, essentially loyalist and honorable underworld character.

The original Turkish title of the series, *Eşkîya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz*, was a poem of the famous Turkish realist poet Sabahattin Ali (1907-1948), who spent many months in the Sinop Fortress Prison as a critic to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's policies. Sabahattin Ali wrote a poem with the title *Eşkîya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz*, inspired by a famous bandit of Rize, in the Black Sea region, Sandıkçı Şükrü. The title of the poem was later taken by the famous musician, composer, author and politician, Zülfü Livaneli, for his album with the same name, in 1976. Şükrü was a legendary figure of the eşkiya world of the late Ottoman Empire and was imprisoned in the same prison as Sabahattin Ali in Sinop, from where he had managed to escape.

Incidentally, the dissident Sabahattin Ali was killed under very opaque circumstances in the Turkish-Bulgarian border while trying to flee from Turkey to Bulgaria with the assistance of a smuggler, who allegedly turned up to be an agent of the National Security Service (the predecessor of MIT).²⁵

Eşkîya (bandit) or *efe* (bandit/thief) were the terms used for the bandits in the countryside and the mountains, while the term *kabaday* (a rough or crude uncle)

²⁵ Arslanbenzer, Hakan, Sabah Daily, Sabahattin Ali: Tragic romance and dark realism; April 4 2015; <https://www.dailysabah.com/books/2015/04/04/sabahattin-ali-tragic-romance-and-dark-realism>; Date Accessed: May 19 2020; Muradoğlu, Abdullah, Yeni Safak, Muhalif Sabahattin Ali'ye sınırda devlet işkencesi; November 25 2011; <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazidizileri/muhalif-sabahattin-aliye-sinirda-devlet-iskencesi-352968>; Date Accessed: May 19 2020

was used for the bandits in urban environment. Their appearance in the Ottoman period was intricately linked with the social and political dynamics of the Empire as well as with the contestation of the state power, especially during the 19th century. Frank Bovenkerk and Yücel Yeşilgöz argue that there are two specific types of eskiya.:

“Although the underlying economic and political causes of rebellion are the same in most societies – poverty, exploitation and oppression – there are two specific types of traditional Turkish rebels. The first is part of a social movement with prophetic aspects and a revolutionary nature. The force of this type of rebel lies in his ability to gather a sizeable following on the basis of a programme. The second type, the bandit, operates individually or in a small band of kindred spirits. In the city they are called kabadayi and in the mountains they are known as efe or eşkiya. With their individual agility, fearlessness and strength, they command the respect of all. The prevailing social movement requires its members to obey strict rules of conduct, but the bandits, insofar as they live in the city, opt for a worldlier lifestyle”²⁶.

Figures like Sandıkçı Şükrü were often seen as “Robin Hoods”, stealing money from the rich and giving to the poor. Even so, there have been “also descriptions of merciless thugs and gangs working with the police or other state authorities in maintaining order and exploiting farmers and tenants”²⁷. For scholars like Frank Bovenkerk, Yücel Yeşilgöz, and Rayan Gingeras, there is a cultural connection between the Ottoman underworld, the eşkiya and the kabadayi, as well as the current behavior of the Turkish underworld. Their emergence is not new, whereas long before drug trafficking existed, there were underworlds operating in the cities and gangs in the countryside engaged in other criminal, and also non-criminal, activities. According to them,

“In many publications, the Turkish godfathers (babas²⁸) appear to have emerged only recently and their appearance would seem to be the result of the advent of drug trafficking. That representation of the facts is incorrect. Long (...) It is important to know something of this historic background to understand the actions of the old baba and new baba of today (...) In the underworld, too, there are rules for conducting business, settling disputes and the admissibility of violence (...) In Turkey, such rules are rooted in the code of honor, the *racon*. It is striking to see how such traditions affect the current behavior of crime bosses from Turkey throughout Europe, down to the districts of the cities where they operate.”²⁹

²⁶ Bovenkerk, Frank, Yeşilgöz, Yücel, *The Turkish Mafia*. Milo Books Ltd. Kindle Edition, 2011

²⁷ *idem*

²⁸ According to Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz, “The book and the three Godfather films have changed the underworld, the police, the judicial authorities and general image-forming drastically and irrevocably. Before the film was shown in Turkey, the underworld bosses were generally referred to by the term *ağa*, which means no more than chieftain, lord or major landowner. Since 1971, however, under the influence of the cinema, this has changed and they are generally referred to as *baba* or father”

²⁹ Bovenkerk, Frank, Yesilgoz, Yucel, *The Turkish Mafia*. Milo Books Ltd. Kindle Edition, 2011

Just like Çakırbeyli in *The Bandits* series, experts have suggested that within the special Ottoman and later Turkish context, many members of the underworld were coopted by the state.

As Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz argue:

“[I]n most accounts of the kabadayi and the eşkiya it is striking that, at some point in their career, they are bribed to start working for the authorities. Politically speaking, therefore, these predecessors of modern organized crime in Turkey would seem to represent a conservative rather than a revolutionary force”.³⁰

Just like the “Robin Hood” kabadayi and eşkiya figures were present in the underworld during the Ottoman Empire, so were left-wing babas present in the underworld of Turkey. Behçet Cantürk was one of the most famous left-wing figures of the modern Turkish underworld. Considered to be one of the most efficient smugglers, he was politically active before and after the 1980 coup, then he focused on the Kurdish struggle and was accused by the Turkish authorities to smuggle drugs in Europe in the name of the PKK.

Even the other famous figure of the underworld of that period, Dündar Kiliç, the father-in-law of Alaattin Cakici, had friendly relations with the leftist Turkish authors Yaşar Kemal and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu and the film star Yılmaz Güney, who he had met them in prison. Despite the fact that Kiliç had financially supported MHP, “he was registered with the secret service as a ‘left-wing baba’ (although) he didn’t consider that new title acceptable”.³¹

Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz argue that the panorama of the Turkish underworld changed dramatically when organized crime groups were drawn into the secret war of the state, backed by ultra-nationalist forces within the government, first against Armenian nationalists in the 1980s, and then especially against the Kurdish movement for self-government in the 1990s. These ended the golden days of independent criminal mafia organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, with characters like Heybetli and Kiliç dominating the underworld, and the mafia not so much controlled by politics.³²

That subsequently changed in the 1980s with the emergence of the modern, politically aware type of a mafia boss.³³ Abdulah Catli and Alaattin Cakici are the principal archetypes of this new type of underworld figures, followed by Sedat Peker, a younger figure of the underworld, “who encapsulated the spirit of the

³⁰ *idem*

³¹ Bovenkerk, Frank, Yesilgoz, Yucel, *The Turkish Mafia*. Milo Books Ltd. Kindle Edition, 2011

³² *idem*

³³ *idem*

organized crime in Turkey at the end of the twentieth century”.³⁴ The conversion of these archetypes into TV series heroes and the permanent inclusion of real facts and situations, as well as of domestic and foreign political developments in the plots created a special effect that (in the case of both the *Valley of the Wolves* and the *Bandits*) “in a way, the audiences were watching the series [*Valley of the Wolves*] as if they were watching a documentary. Soon, fantasy began to get mixed up with reality”.³⁵

Adana Sifir Bir and Cukur: Urban poor and counter-narratives

The *Valley of the Wolves* and the *Bandits* could be seen as a reflection of a reality centered on the state, its activities, its enemies and its mythology within a political and social atmosphere where insecurity about the fate of the state and ultimately of the nation is instilled to the public.

The valley of the Wolves opened new horizons in a period where the state before the AKP-dominated era felt threatened. *The Bandits* followed the same path in a period where the AKP had definitively entered into a process that brings back the authoritative reflexes of the state, accentuated by a narrative where Turkey is fighting a war for survival in all fronts, inside and outside.

However, in this precise period, where the state and its mythology are in a definitive comeback and where the dominant narrative is that of a formidable Turkey fighting against enemies and traitors, the feelings and perceptions of a significant part of the society seem to be quite distant both from the state and the formidable Turkey.

Through two very popular different TV series, *Adana Sifir Bir* and *Cukur*, a kind of bottom-up reality emerged, against a kind of top down one. It is a different reality that challenges the dominant narrative and moreover contests the state through a social counter-narrative, therefore reflecting a deep dynamic of change within the Turkish society and specially its youth. This different reality first found its way to the screens of viewers on Youtube in 2016, with the series of *Adana Sifir Bir* (“Zero One”, for the first two numbers of the Adana car license plate).

Adana01 is a rough, raw series taking place mainly in Adana in southeast Turkey. It depicts the adventures of a gang of young local criminals who fight against their rivals. Raw violence, stabbings, shootings, and beatings dominate the series,

³⁴ Gingeras, Ryan, “Heroin, organized crime and the making of modern Turkey”, Oxford University Press, London, 2018

³⁵ Gökçen, Sinan, Homer, Sean, Oates Caroline, Consuming Nationalism: Contemporary Nationalism in Turkish Popular Culture, Proceedings of the 1st Annual SEERC Doctoral Student Conference Thessaloniki, July 10, 2006; <http://seerc.org/docs/phd-resources/DSC2006.pdf#page=269> ; Date Accessed: April 27 2020

in contrast to the *Valley of the Wolves* and *The Bandits*, where violence is always present, but never that raw. While Çakırbeyli and Alemdar live and operate in conspicuously luxurious environments, dress expensively and represent a sort of elite underworld, the characters of *Adana01*, like the gang leader Savas (“war” in Turkish) and his friends, family and enemies live and operate in poor neighborhoods, amongst marginalized and poor populations. “It’s realistic. It’s raw. It doesn’t hide anything,” said Yigit Cakir, 33, a barista and actor in Istanbul who is one of the show’s fans. “They use the language that we use in our daily life.”³⁶

For the first two seasons, the series was broadcasted on Youtube. As a result, the creators were free from limitations imposed by Turkish broadcasters and allowing them to evade government censorship of difficult topics such as teenage drug addition (and also allowing the characters to smoke). Nevertheless, the decision to post on the Internet did not prevent “Sifir Bir” from finding an audience. The first episode had more than 10 million views on YouTube, though the show’s producers say the number of regular viewers each week is about 2 million to 3 million³⁷.

Later, the series was moved to Blue TV, a subscription Turkish TV channel where the high popularity and success of the series continued.

“The team behind the production — inspired by American crime shows such as “The Wire” — intended it as a retort to the lavish historical epics, summer-romance serials and white-collar crime dramas that dominate Turkish television. Those shows, which are among the country’s most popular exports, are dubbed into local languages from the Middle East to South America and beam a largely lustrous image of Turkey around the world. They have also frequently reflected the priorities of Turkey’s leaders by amplifying nationalist rhetoric or, more recently, reviving the Ottoman historical legacy that is central to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s conservative Islamist appeal. The striving ethos of the Erdogan era is often reflected in the extravagantly wealthy protagonists, ensconced in Bosphorus mansions. Television projects the president’s morals, too: Alcohol and cigarettes, for instance, are blurred out or covered up in television shows. But the appeal of “Sifir Bir” suggests that some portion of Turkey’s television-obsessed population was yearning for something a little more real. The main characters are working-class anti-heroes. They preside over streets a million miles removed from the Turkey of travel brochures: neighborhoods that recall Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, long neglected by the government, where policemen feared to tread”.³⁸

³⁶ Fahim, Kareem, Karatas, Zeynep, The Washington Post, In Turkey, a surprise-hit crime drama trades the glitter for grit, October 31, 2017; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2017/10/31/feature/a-gritty-turkish-crime-drama-inspired-by-the-wire-finds-an-enthusiastic-audience/>; Date Accessed: May 20 2020

³⁷ *idem*

³⁸ *idem*

The series has become very trendy amongst a very significant part of the youth in Turkey and eventually the film “Sifir Bir” went to cinemas in January 2020.

According to the website Box Office Turkiye, it “added its signature to a magnificent premiere,” opening second behind an animated children's film that was at the top of the charts for its second week running. “Sifir Bir” sold 280,000 tickets in its opening weekend and came just under 15,000 behind the top film, though it was screened at only 325 theaters, in comparison to the 821 showing the No. 1 film.³⁹

Adana Sifir Bir portrays a sort of “primitive” gang with a high sense of honor and a very particular and ambiguous sense of morality and social justice since “as they murder competitors, they also rub out pimps who abuse sex workers and drug dealers blamed for hooking teenagers on heroin”⁴⁰. The series is also portraying the ethnic plurality of Adana and makes clear references to the Kurdish populations and their life experiences, in a way that radically contests the “uniformity of Turkish television”⁴¹ which reflects the dominant narrative.

Osterlun argues that the series reflect “the diverse demographics of Adana, many of the show's characters are Kurds (director Kadri Beran Taskin, who also plays a sharply dressed lawyer in the series, originally hails from the southeastern city of Diyarbakir) and one season begins each episode with a flashback to Savas' childhood, as his family has just arrived in the city presumably after fleeing the conflict in the southeastern, Kurdish provinces of the country between the militant Kurdistan Workers Party and state security forces in the 1990s. Thousands of villages were destroyed in the region, uprooting residents and causing many to seek shelter and a new life in major cities like Adana.”⁴²

The series broadly reflects another social reality from the one of the dominant narrative of Ankara and moreover presents the gang as an alternative to the state, or moreover a substitute of it when it comes to economic redistribution and protection, with which the gang members have no relations and no connections, contrary to the underworld figures of the Valley of the Wolves and the Bandits. The gang has nothing patriotic or nationalistic and the story is all about survival in a violent and challenging environment and about a search of a sort of social justice.

In the period after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, where the state is once again venerated and while the economic and social realities are gradually

³⁹ Osterlun, Paul, Benjamin, Al Monitor, Turkey's YouTube gangsters hit mainstream box office, January 17 2020; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/gangster-series-becomes-box-office-success-in-turkey.html>; Date Accessed: May 18 2020

⁴⁰ Fahim, Kareem, Karatas, Zeynep, The Washington Post, *idem*

⁴¹ *idem*

⁴² Osterlun, Paul, Benjamin, Al Monitor, *idem*

contradicting the dominant narrative of prosperity and grandeur, *Adana Sifir Bir* is clearly reflecting and revealing another reality of Turkey. Furthermore, it also reflects that there is a deep current of social change within a significant part of the population that is not espousing the narrative of the “holiness” of the state of the *Valley of the Wolves* and the *Bandits* but contests it, albeit with a desperately introvert and violent way which is also revealing of its psychological state of mind.

Yetkin argues that *Adana Sifir Bir* shows an alternative to the state.

According to him:

*“The neighborhood and especially the gang draws a line which has nothing to do with state and almost a stateless society (...) The power of the state is rejected and reconstructed in the gang and almost whole neighborhood (...) Throughout the series, we barely see the police and state, and they do not have big impacts over the neighborhood”.*⁴³

Cukur’s anti-heros

Cukur (“pit” in Turkish) started in 2017 and its about a fictive neighborhood in Istanbul, associated with the working-class neighborhood of Balat, by the Golden Horn, in the broader conservative district of Fatih, which is in a deep process of gentrification since some years and centers on a fictional Istanbul neighborhood of the same name where godfather Idris Kocovali leads his family clan in the fight against drugs and rival mafia bosses. Letsch argues that despite that *Cukur* is a poor and dangerous neighborhood, it is a place where family honor and neighborliness are important⁴⁴ Just like *Adana Sifir Bir*’s anti-heroes, *Cukur* “depicts the lives of unemployed young men who live in poor urban districts and who try to survive in an unjust, brutal world by means of petty crime”⁴⁵.

Cukur has become very popular and even the symbol of Çukur, composed of three points surrounded by the mathematical symbol for larger and smaller (<...>), has become one of the trendiest tattoos amongst youngsters in Turkey, together with *Cukur* symbol T-shirts. Just like in *Adana Sifir Bir*, the state and its role are perceived negatively and there are neither connections nor cooperation with the state or its mythological deep alter ego. The state is absent from *Cukur* and when it is depicted it is in a rather negative way, reflecting once again that

⁴³ Yetkin, Serdar, Academia.edu, *Adana Sifir Bir: A story of guns and brothers*, June 2 2017; https://www.academia.edu/33331581/ADANA_SIFIR_BIR?email_work_card=title; Date Accessed: May 15 2020

⁴⁴ Letsch, Constanze, *The Arab Weekly*, Turkish TV show about urban poor hits a raw nerve, July 27 2019; <https://theArabweekly.com/turkish-tv-show-about-urban-poor-hits-raw-nerve>; Date Accessed: May 20 2020

⁴⁵ *idem*

amongst a significant part of the population, the state and its re-emergence are either problematic or irrelevant.

The main issues of *Cukur*, just like in *Adana Sifir Bir*, are not the state neither Turkey nor their survival but the everyday survival of the urban poor, those who are left behind, and a desperate, albeit criminal, quest of social justice. According to Letsch, “the popularity of violent TV shows that depict poor urban areas is a sign of the zeitgeist, wrote Ceren Sehircioglu in the *Hurriyet* newspaper.

Writers and producers have woken up to the reality of those who have been marginalised and forgotten in the peripheries of big cities all over the country, Sehircioglu said. Programmes such as “*Cukur*” show the lives of unemployed young men who live in poor urban districts and who try to survive in an unjust, brutal world by means of petty crime. The so-called “neighbourhood TV shows” that depicted the lives of poor families in a romantic light, wildly popular in the 1990s and the early 2000s, are too removed from the reality of Turkish metropolises, the journalist said”.⁴⁶

No patriotism, no nationalism, no foreign powers threatening Turkey’s global ascension, just like *Adana Sifir Bir*, *Cukur* is a desperate and violent counter-narrative, a counter-reality to the realities of the Valley of the Wolves and the Bandits centered around the state and its legitimation. “With its depictions of casual street violence and policemen as bystanders, ‘*Sifir Bir*’ challenged the government’s confident projection of power and control at a time when authorities have embarked on a wide-ranging hunt^[SEP] for state enemies after an attempted coup last summer”.⁴⁷

“In today’s Turkey, where decades of neoliberal and corrupt urban policies chased thousands from their old neighborhoods and into soulless apartment blocks on the periphery, where unemployment, economic instability and anxiety about the future dominate the daily lives of most people and where many people have lost faith in justice and the government, “*Cukur*” hits a nerve”.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Idem*

⁴⁷ Fahim, Kareem, Karatas, Zeynep, *The Washington Post*, *idem*

⁴⁸ *idem*

From the Valley to a Pit

And while this “nerve” is “hit” amongst the youth and the real anti-heroes, these series “hit a nerve” also amongst politicians. The Turkish Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu harshly criticized *Cukur*⁴⁹, while the leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli has publicly stated that the *Bandits* is one of his favorite series.⁵⁰

Both *Adana Sifi Bir's* and *Cukur's* immense popularity are revealing of the dynamics of contestation of and resistance against the dominant narrative of a grandiose Turkey, as well as that of the sacrosanct state and its re-emergence. They also uncover, through TV fiction, the process of tribalization of politics and society and how it has become rampant in modern Turkey.

Both in *Cukur* and *Adana Sifi Bir*, the gangs have their “own rules and own set of ideas about justice and equality. It won't be a mistake to claim that because they are at the periphery of the society, they built up a new society against the others. In that manner, for the protection of the neighborhood, they steal, kill, and die willingly. They live almost a tribal life in their district”.⁵¹

In order to understand modern Turkey, “a crucial, but the often-neglected factor is political tribalization. While sociological cleavages or class-based alignments are still accepted as the most useful analytical tools for many political analysts, the current zeitgeist opens up avenues for more unorthodox approaches, such as taking tribes as the primary political units”⁵².

While in the political sphere tribalization is mainly around the polarization between President Erdogan's supporters and opponents, which easily mobilizes and legitimizes the consolidation discourse about the survival of the state and the nation, in society the tribalization is having a deeper fragmentation impact, accentuated by the growing harsh economic and social conditions and the shadow of violence. In the social tribalization, as a last resort of survival and social justice, the state is either absent or an obstacle for the survival and the solidarity of the “tribe” against all the rest.

⁴⁹ OdaTV, Süleyman Soylu'nun hedefinde Çukur dizisi var, October 27 2019; <https://odatv4.com/suleyman-soylunun-hedefinde-cukur-dizisi-var-27101947.html>; Date Accessed: May 18 2020

⁵⁰ Internethaber, Devlet Bahçeli'nin kaçırmadığı iki dizi!; <https://www.internethaber.com/devlet-bahcelinin-kacirmadigi-iki-dizi-foto-galerisi-1769366.htm>; Date Accessed: May 15 2020

⁵¹ Yetkin, Serdar, Academia.edu, *idem*

⁵² Erdogan, Emre, The German Marshal Fund, The Rise of Tribal Politics: A Key to Understanding Turkish Politics, March 13 2019; <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/rise-tribal-politics-key-understanding-turkish-politics>; Date Accessed: May 15 2020

The long transition from the *Valley* (of the Wolves) to the *Pit* (Cukur) in TV series closely mirrors the journey of the Turkish state in the last two decades, from liberal transformation to authoritarian re-appearance but moreover reveals the ongoing dynamics of contestation of the legitimacy of a sublime and ubiquitous state.

The different and radically conflicting realities and counter-realities that are reflected in these series, as well as in the *Bandits* and *Adana Sifir Bir*, are cultural expressions of the political and social tribalization in Turkey and are intimately linked with the ongoing tug of war for the soul and the future of the country.